

CATALOGUE

DESCRIPTIVE OF

"CHRIST

ENTERING JERUSALEM."

BY

MATT MORGAN.

PRESENTED TO THE PUBLIC

BY

J. M. HILL.

CHRIST AT THE BETHLEHEM GATE.

THIS picture (which is thirty feet by twelve) represents that episode in the life of Christ which is preserved to us in Palm Sunday, the *Dominica Palmarum* of the fathers: the entry into Jerusalem of the Christian historians, of which an account has come down to us in John xii., 12-16, in Matthew xii., and in Mark xi. Jesus had started from Bethany on foot, and taken one of the three roads that lead over the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. He had left the palm trees of Bethany and come through the fig gardens of Bethpage, followed by a constantly increasing crowd. It was to this little hamlet of Bethpage that one of the disciples was sent to fetch an ass and an ass's colt, and when Christ was seated upon the animal the multitude broke forth with triumphal acclamations, and began to cut the palm branches and wave them, thus giving to the procession its commemorative and regnant character.

The artist has chosen the moment of Christ's approach to the gates of Jerusalem for his composition, and in order to understand the scene it must be remembered that the event took place at the time of the preparation for the Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded beyond its walls into those beautiful and wooded suburbs that Titus thirty years afterwards denuded of their timber to make crucifixes. The caravans of Jews had been arriving for days. The city trembled with the pressure of a heterogeneous life that it knew at no other time. Its outlying khans and caves were populated with pilgrims, and among this dense floating population had spread with oriental facility and oriental exaggeration, no doubt, the stories of the healings and the wonderful miracle at Bethany, where Lazarus had come forth from his tomb.

In order to understand the human conditions which obtained at this time, we must remember that Jerusalem and its suburbs were estimated to have contained nearly three million people.

We must also bear in mind that the world was without most of the assuaging moral and physical agencies, public and private, which have since then modified suffering with sympathy and science. If physical disorders were then not as subtle or as widely disseminated, they were probably more poignant and pitiless, and the victims more helpless. Epilepsy was then an infliction of the gods, as the pagan names of *morbus sacer*, *morbus divus*, still indicate, or it was the possession by a devil that nothing but super-human power could exorcise.

The leprosy which the Israelites had brought out of Egypt with them banned its victims not only from human contact, but from human sympathy. Anatomy was an unknown science. Hospitals were as yet unfounded.

That mercy which has since spread its benign and protective wings over civilization was then only seen dimly and superstitiously in the august but tender majesty of the master who had come up from Bethany. The world at that time was a sad and a very cruel world. One half the race was slaves, the other half monsters. Rome had driven her cohorts over all hearth-stones and shrines. She had furrowed every land with graves, and wet every grave with the tears of the surviving victims. We who know that wherever the tread of armies is now heard there follow the assuaging fingers that unfurl the Geneva cross, can form but a faint conception of the merciless character of the Roman wars. And ceaseless warfare of invasion and defence had left no room for the gracious virtues of compassion.

We can therefore understand what this apparition of infinite love and infinite power meant to all the wretches huddled round the gates of Jerusalem, or hiding in its limestone quarries.

Rumors of his supernatural power and his astonishing human tenderness must have been carried from gate to gate by the pilgrims, and, no doubt, told with something of the extravagance that has been preserved in some of the apochryphal traditions. The account of the raising of Lazarus must have been on many tongues. A subtle pervasive hope may have been entertained

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that a great prophet had surely come ; an instinctive belief certainly spread among all the wretched, the maimed, and the afflicted, that if they could but get to him, throw themselves in his path, and kiss the hem of his garment, some kind of succor would reach them.

The artist has seized this emotional and (inferentially) the symbolical aspect of the scene rather than its processional and triumphal features.

The moment is that when, having reached the gates of Jerusalem, and pressed upon by the accumulated supplicants, Christ has dismounted from the ass and lifts his arm as if to still the clamor and hubbub of eager and supplicating voices. The gesture is one of sublime benignity, in which authority and pity are inseparable. The concourse of the crippled and the palsied, the halt, the blind, and the outcast, has by the impetus of its misfortunes and the eagerness of its hopes stopped him for the moment. He is hemmed in by misery, and he rises in the centre of this unexampled assemblage, at once the incarnation of supernatural succor and the embodiment of the new evangel of mercy.

In what may be called the foreground plane of the picture there are forty-three figures, represented in various degrees of relief, and grouped with an admirable dramatic effect about the central personage. Most of them are sufferers. They are in every attitude of supplication, and they denote every phase of human emotion that the opportunity would call into existence. Eager, importunate, and selfish invalidism, as in the remarkably strong group of four in the extreme left hand corner, where the Arab in Bedouin costume is side by side with the appealing Nubian, and a little behind them the crippled beggar on crutches is vainly endeavoring to force his way to the front. Reverent and humble appeal, as of the Jewish maiden in the centre foreground, who has had her palsied father laid in the path of the Christ, with the unmistakable belief that hers is the most pitiable case of all. Maternal solicitude, as of the mother who holds her nude babe up to be touched ; shamefaced wretchedness ; staring curiosity, as of the Roman soldier ; and a refined interest and inclination, as of the Greek girl he is supporting. An epileptic boy has lifted the robe of the Saviour, and is kissing it. On the right, another boy is pulling a blind beg-

gar into the scene with youthful impatience. Scattered through the group we have water-carriers, Bethlehem shepherds, Pharisees, apostles, high-priests; Semitic, Hellenic, and even Coptic faces, misery, despair, superstition, arrogant contempt, stoical indifference, Levitical pride are all shown in this mob, and against the intense physical action and contrariety of it all the artist has projected the calm dignity and purity of his central figure, with the mob of the middle distance stretching down the roadway behind him for an immediate background, and the limestone quarries and ruins, peopled with lepers, on a hill beyond, and a calm Judean afternoon sky for the perspective.

The "situation," as it may be called, is obvious at once. The triumphal procession, which had come with him from Bethany, is interrupted by the press of unfortunates. We see the palm branches strewn about in the foreground, and St. John is represented immediately behind the figure of Christ, in the act of expostulating in a kindly way with the crowd. The acclamations and chant of rejoicing have been suspended, and the tumult of misery takes their place.

The first impression made by the face and figure of Christ is that it is the traditional, I had almost said the conventional Christ. This, I think, it will be found, is owing to the attitude and rectitude of the person, and the somewhat formal disposition of the tallith or robe, worn like a Roman toga, and not to the face or the character expressed in mien and lineaments.

This face can only be criticised from the ideal standpoint. Data for a portrait of Christ cannot be found outside of the imagination of the artist, who must construct his type upon the basis of character, and not upon the meagre and contradictory details of tradition. And probably no nobler endeavor can be made in art than that which seizes upon character and creates the expression that fits it. This is indeed the act of creative art.

Just how far Mr. Morgan has succeeded in this, the focus and fulcrum of his picture, will, I suppose, be as it has always been whenever the boldest of pencils have attempted the task—a matter of critical dispute. It may be said here that the face is that of the mystic, as it should be, if temperament is to be taken into consideration. It has not only the repose of conscious power, but the

abstraction of spiritual superiority to environment. It is the *esse* and not the *existere* that speaks first in the meaning of the sad features.

Some little allowance must be made for the attempt to preserve the accepted traditional characteristics, and it need hardly be said here that these characteristics owe much more to the disputed description of Publius Lentulus, than to any well defined or authoritative oral tradition.

The question of artistic excellence must rest on the artist's success in making the personality conform to the authoritative record of the character, not in conforming it to apochryphal descriptions.

The question which generous criticism may safely put, and which best meets the demand of the sympathetic observer, is this :—

Is that an expression in form of any or all the transcendent virtues of the historic character who is regarded both as the ideal man and the incarnated deity ?

A few moments contemplation of the picture, and the mingled pathos, purity, and authority of the Christ dominate everything in it.

He is represented in the garment of the sage or teacher, and his head is uncovered by the sudarium, showing his auburn hair flowing to his shoulders after the manner of the Nazarenes, the light from behind touching its flossy circumference with a natural and delicate suggestion of halo. Over and above all else it is the face of a man of sorrows. The sorrow of infinite pity.

But not alone the present suffering that is crowding upon him is sufficient to account for that far-reaching pathos. We must call to mind what had just occurred, in order to sound the depths of that look of prevision and compassion.

The accounts of the march from Bethany are given from different standpoints. The synoptists accompany him from that place, but St. John appears to have gone out to meet him with the "great crowd" from Jerusalem. But it is certain that as the procession turned a sharp shoulder in the Jericho road that crossed the Mount of Olives, and while the multitude were giving a Messianic character to this entry by their shouts, Jerusalem burst upon their view, blazing with oriental splendor in purple and

gold through that afternoon haze: the smoke of sacrifice from her temple hanging in a hazy cloud over her towers — where now stands like a ghost the dome of the Mosque El-Aksa. We can well think that the words of the Psalmist came back with the sounds of the distant trumpets from Mount Sion. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth." But even then — with the peace and the odors of spring in her valleys and the festal songs of her multitudes in his ears, some premonition of her awful fate had seized him, and he had uttered those words, wet with the tears of compassion and pregnant with the truth of prophecy, that the incomparable and indescribable horrors of the Roman siege a few years later must have brought back to the recollection of her perishing children.

With this terrible vision before his eyes — a vision which, when it became a fact, Josephus painted in blood — one can well understand that neither human compassion nor divine benignity would smile.

Above and beyond the merely dramatic personality of the picture — and certainly its distributed human interest is most admirably handled — is the ethico-historical significance. In the growing light of eighteen hundred years the Christian will see in this picture the full Paschal import of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, — marching to his sacrifice with acclamations that were misapplied, and suffering a death that not even his disciples understood.

To the mere student of history it will not fail to make more concrete some of the great truths of the past.

The Roman officer and the æsthetic Greek girl are types of a passing power and sensualism, just as the high priest on the right is the expression of a hard, arrogant, and implacable sectarianism, and all are standing unwittingly in the pallid light that is beginning to irradiate their own decadence. Here are the three historic antagonisms which were to work out the after-tragedy and triumph of the Christian epos.

To all who, irrespective of sect, are brothers in humanity, and have tried to look back through the tempests and darkness of ages to that strange, sweet light that broke above the peaks of Palestine, and have endeavored to realize the import of the celes-

tial song — that softly fell like the matin hymn of a new sunrise on the strife and fatalism of a world staggering to a hopeless death through darkness — there must come with this white effigy of love and power, standing in beneficent authority amid the despair and the distress of his time, some of the realizing sense which Art alone can offer to Faith ; of the wondrous beauty and still incomprehensible majesty of that Master who called those who loved him, and bade them go out into the world and wipe away the tears and bind up the broken hearts, and thus with tender touches of a new human sympathy to make that world better, and to expect no reward from it.

If the artist with his colors has caught but faintly some of the overtones of that hymn that made morning for the race — of Peace upon earth and good-will to men — if he has sufficiently seized the splendid incident somewhere between the song of advent and the benediction of death — when this figure began the triumphal march of martyrdom, and makes us acknowledge that the hymn has lived through all the nights and discords of time, and is heard still in the silver bells of our civilization all over the world : if he recalls to us the fact that the palm branches are waving yet, not alone in the hands of a despised few, but, like plumes of victory, in the hands of the intelligent many, he will have made pictorial art more than a local drama, for it will thrill with a world-wide revolution.

New York World,
April 29, 1888.

THE V

CHRIST AT BETHLEHEM GATE.

A PRESS VIEW OF MATT MORGAN'S LARGE BIBLICAL PAINTING.

The Saviour's Approach to Jerusalem Idealized by the Artist—The Groupings Done with Admirable Dramatic Effect—The Picture the Property of J. M. Hill—To Be Placed on Exhibition in Boston.

Representatives of the press were on Thursday invited to visit the great painting of "Christ at the Bethlehem Gate," which has just been completed at his residence at Staten Island by Mr. Matt Morgan for Mr. J. M. Hill. The artist received his commission some six or eight months ago, and the painting is now ready to be taken to Boston, where it is to be exhibited this week at Horticultural Hall.

In giving the order for this large and important work Mr. Hill may have been, and no doubt was, mainly influenced by his well-known admiration for Biblical subjects, but it will not detract from the governing motive to say that he probably was sensible of the recent interest awakened here in what may be called Christian art, and was keenly alive to the enormous popular success of Munkacsy's two Biblical pictures, which have probably been duplicated oftener and circulated wider than any picture that has been shown here for years. Whether Mr. Hill did or did not recognize the local renaissance, it is safe to say that he consistently followed his own method and selected for the work, as he generally does, a local artist.

Mr. Matt Morgan is not known to us as a creative artist of the historic category, although it is said by those who saw them that his best pictures were those enormous cartoons of our late war which were destroyed by fire at Cincinnati and for which Mr. Steele Mackaye was engaged at an enormous price to deliver the descriptive lecture. We know Mr. Morgan mainly through his scenic work, for which he has gained a reputation as wide as the continent, but which is apt to leave upon every dissection his brush will make the suspicion of theatrical effect.

His latest work will hardly fail therefore to create some surprise. It is a canvas 30 feet long, by 12 feet high, on which are represented, with more or less distinctness, several hundred people, those in the immediate foreground being life-size. He was left to make his own selection

of the Biblical subject and his treatment of it. His liberal patron and backer predicated the success of the composition entirely on his faith in the artist's ability.

The picture represents that episode in the life of Christ which is preserved to us in Palm Sunday, the *Dominica Palmaram* of the fathers: the entry into Jerusalem of the Christian historians, of which an account has come down to us in John xii., 12-16, in Matthew xii. and in Mark xi. Jesus had started from Bethany on foot and taken one of the three roads that lead over the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem. He had left the palm trees of Bethany and come through the fig gardens of Bethpage, followed by a constantly increasing crowd. It was to this little hamlet of Bethpage that one of the disciples was sent to fetch an ass and an ass's colt, and when Christ was seated upon the animal the multitude broke forth with triumphal acclamations and began to cut the palm branches and wave them, thus giving to the procession its commemorative and regnant character.

The artist has chosen the moment of Christ's approach to the gates of Jerusalem for his composition, and in order to understand that the scene it must be remembered that the event took place at the time of the preparation for the Passover, when Jerusalem was crowded beyond its walls into the beautiful and wooded suburbs that Tiber thirty years afterwards denuded of their timber to make crucifixes. The caravans of Jews had been arriving for days. The city trembled with the pressure of a heterogeneous life that it knew at no other time. Its outlying khans and caves were populated with pilgrims and among this dense floating population had spread with Oriental facility and Oriental exaggeration, no doubt, the stories of the healings and the wonderful miracle at Bethany, where Lazarus had come forth from his tomb.

In order to realize the conditions which brought this crowd of maimed and sick about the gate to intercept the advancing Christ, it is necessary to reflect that the world at that time had not the modern faith in science. If physical disorders were not as subtle they were probably more fatal, and the victims at all times more helpless. Epilepsy was then either an infliction of the gods or the pagan names of *morbus sacer*, *morbus divus*, still indicate, or it was the possession by a devil that nothing but supernatural power could exorcise.

The leprosy which the Israelites had brought out of Egypt with them, lanced its victims not only from human contact, but from human sympathy. Anatomy was an unknown science. Hospitals were as yet unfounded. That mercy which has since spread his inaudible but protective wings over civilization was then only foreshadowed in the august but tender majesty of the master who had come up from Bethany. The world at that time was a very cruel world. Rome had furrowed every land with graves and wet every grave with the tears of the victims that survived.

We can therefore understand what this apparition of infinite love and infinite power meant to all the wretches huddled round the gates of Jerusalem or hiding in its limestone quarries.

The artist has seized, happily, I think, this emotional and symbolical aspect of the scene rather than its processional and triumphal features. The moment is that, when pressed upon by the accumulated supplicants, Christ has dismounted from the ass and lifts his arm as if to still the clamor and hubbub of eager and suppliant voices. The gesture is one of sublime benignity, in which authority and pity are inseparable. The concourse of the crippled and the palsied, the halt the blind and the outcast has by the impetus of its misfortunes and the eagerness of its hopes, stopped him for the moment. He is hemmed in by misery, and he sees in the centre of this unexamined assemblage, at once the incarnation of supernatural sorrow and the embodiment of the new evangel of mercy.

In what may be called the foreground plane of the picture there are forty-three figures, and they are grouped with excellent dramatic effect, and an equally admirable distribution of human interest, in the preservation of which the best allowable



arrangement of contrasts in color no less than in line has been preserved. It was here more than in anything else that Munkacsy's two pictures fell short. The eye never quite forgave the formal parallelism of lines. The broken adjustment of these figures shows the excellence of the linear composition. On the extreme left, where the crowd is most closely packed, the eye is caught by the old cripple who is one of four kneeling persons, that one nearest the spectator being an Arab, wearing the same Bedouin costume that has been retained with slight modifications to this day. The centre figure is that of a Nubian with outstretched hands. Immediately in front of him is a Samaritan woman, holding her nude child up to be touched by the Christ, the fingers of whose right hand are close to the limp little body.

Close about are the mingled characters that made a Judean crowd at all times picturesque. A squalid leper sustains her pained father in the immediate front of the Christ, and her head and face, partly covered by the Jewish head-dress, form one of the loveliest profiles in the work. An epileptic boy has dragged himself through the assemblage and crawling to the feet of the Christ has seized the hem of his garment and is kissing it. On the extreme right another boy is eagerly pulling a blind beggar into the little space. Bethlehem shepherds, water-carriers, Pharisees, apostles, Romans, high priests; Semitic, Hellenic and even Coptic faces; misery, despair, superstition; arrogant contempt, stoical indifference, Levitical pride, are all shown in this mob. And against the intense physical action and contrariety of it all the artist has projected the calm dignity of his central figure.

The first impression made by the Christ will, no doubt, be that it is somewhat conventional in attitude and rectitude, an impression created or at least deepened by the somewhat formal disposition of the tunic, or robe, worn like a Roman toga and showing at one place the heavy blue fringe of the chiton, or undergarment, which was usually worn by the sages or teachers, reaching to the feet. He is without the sardarium, and his uncovered head, with its mass of auburn hair, shows the light from behind touching its fleshy circumference and giving a natural and delicate suggestion of halo.

This face can only be criticised from the ideal standpoint. Data for a portrait of Christ cannot be found outside of the imagination of the artist, who must construct his type upon the basis of character and not upon the meagre and contradictory details of tradition. And probably no nobler endeavor can be made in art than that which takes upon character and creates the ex-

pression, the antithesis of the high priest on the extreme right. Here are the three elements of antagonism which were to work out the after-tragedy and triumph of the Christian epos.

The æsthetic inclination of the Greek girl towards what Kéran has called, somewhat after the manner of the French feuilletonist, "the fine Hellenic spirit of Christ," is noticeably in contrast to the hard martial defiance and puzzled interest of the Roman, and wholly unlike either is the superb secularity, who regards even mercy as an impudence when not read from the Targum or exercised by the letter of the law.

Immediately behind Christ the artist has introduced the figure of John, who is endeavoring to restrain the impatience of the crowd. In the exact centre, but in the middle distance, Peter is holding back the pressing multitude with his arms outstretched. This middle distance is made up of the multitude that have followed the Christ from Bethany and have joined him on the way. The background shows a slight elevation, with a limestone quarry in which the lepers have taken refuge. This suggestion Mr. Morgan evidently got from "Ben Hur." The rest of the background to the right is screened by olive trees that stand out gratefully against a Syrian sky. On the left the white abutments of the Bethlehem Gate rear themselves over the heads of the mob.

It may be said of this composition that it is of abiding human interest, not alone in the variety and contrast of its personalities, but in its pictorial interpretation of historical and moral significances.

I have not seen the work lit as it will be when permanently set up for exhibition, and can not, therefore, speak of its color ensemble as I should like to. It is painted both in oil and in distemper, with that allowance for lighting which a scenic artist alone knows how to make.

I can only say that the distribution of color has been arranged by intelligence, guided by an unerring eye to effect. The use made of the green palm branches that are strewn in the foreground and waved over the heads of the multitude in the background is sufficient proof of this. I do not well see how the theme and its treatment can fail to appeal both to the artistic sense and to the Christian sentiment.

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J. M. HILL.

this, the Roman officer and the Greek girl at the extreme left, admirable types of the Hellenic and Roman spirit that stood unconsciously in the palid light of the new Evangel which was irradiating their own decadence, are as matter of balance in